

Defending the global knowledge commons

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Members are encouraged to use creative commons licensing and to join others in a pledge to be open by agreeing to review for and publish in mainly if not solely open access journals.



The *openMovements* series invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.



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As the global information economy intensifies, voices from the global South have been calling for more coordinated and deliberate work to defend what is known as the global “knowledge commons.” Movements resisting international trade agreements and the patenting of “intellectual property” have been inspired and guided by activists in places like Brazil, India, and South Africa, where strong resistance to TRIPS--or trade-related intellectual property rights agreement--helped keep life-saving medications more affordable and challenged the commodification of knowledge.

At a workshop of scholar-activists during the World Social Forum in 2005, participants from South America

chided those of us in the global North who have (mostly unthinkingly) contributed to the enclosure of the knowledge commons by publishing our work in commercial journals that are only accessible to paid subscribers. As our colleagues observed, much of the scholarly work published in the global North is inaccessible to scholars in the South, and this denies these folks access to information that can advance public health and other shared goods. In addition, it excludes the voices of Southern and less privileged scholars from engaging in academic debates. Many in the global North such as recent graduates, public educators, independent scholars, and contingent faculty are also finding themselves on the losing side of this information divide.

The [open access movement](#) is a rapidly growing movement to defend the knowledge commons by promoting free, online access to scholarly research. Its origins can be traced to a [2001 conference](#) in Budapest, which resulted in the [Budapest Open Access Initiative](#). The movement is fueled in part by the fact that, over the past 25 years, the publishing industry has undergone intense concentration, despite a more than 70% growth in its scholarly content. Northern Illinois University professor Mary H. Munroe concludes that because of the mergers and acquisitions in the industry, university libraries now purchase most of their books and journals from the same 12 companies. Just six companies control 40 of the major scholarly publishers ([Munroe 2007](#)).

Such concentration boosts corporate profits, and thus a small number of very large publishing firms--such as Reed Elsevier--have achieved [profit margins as high as 36%](#). Such rates of return are comparable to those of leading companies in the most profitable (and also highly concentrated) industries like pharmaceuticals. Companies are using their market control to their advantage by, for instance, requiring library subscribers to select pre-configured bundles of journals and to keep their contract terms confidential.

As with any highly consolidated industry, this has meant rising costs for consumers. The cost of academic journals [rose by nearly 300%](#) between 1986 and 2004--with an annual average increase of more than three times the consumer price index. [Many university libraries](#) are being forced to eliminate some journal subscriptions as a result. Shrinking university budgets and publishers' marketing strategies have further exacerbated inequalities in access to scholarly research and publications.

In response to these trends, universities and government agencies are joining librarians and other advocates to support open access publishing. Both claim that they (and the taxpayers who fund them) [should not have to pay twice](#) for access to scholarly research: both pay the costs of research, and universities support faculty reviewers and editors whose largely uncompensated labor is essential to producing scholarly journals. Government funding agencies are now beginning to require that investigators publish their publicly funded research in open access sources.

The [Public Knowledge Project](#) (PKP) was formed in 1998 and is one of the more established organizations supporting online scholarly publishing. A collaborative effort by universities in Canada and the United States, PKP offers free and open source software for open access journals and other scholarly communication such as conferences. The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, or [SPARC](#), is another example of the new organizations emerging to support free and open scholarly communication. SPARC supports the development of infrastructure for open scholarly communication of research, data, and educational resources, and it helps raise awareness of these issues through its [Create Change](#) website. Its membership includes more than 800 academic and research libraries in North America, Europe, Japan, China, and Australia, and the organization works with other groups advancing open access.

Beginning in the early 2000s, university libraries have increasingly been coming together in organizations like PKP, SPARC, and the [Library Publishing Coalition](#) to support, promote, and subsidize open access publishing. The University of Pittsburgh's University Library System, for instance, is one of a growing

number of institutions offering a [publishing service for open access journals](#) that includes PKP's online manuscript submission and processing service at minimal cost. Many universities also provide funds to cover any fees associated with publishing in open access journals. University officials see such investments as a remedy to their shrinking budgets and the rising costs of journals.

In 2007, open access advocates launched [Open Access Week](#), which takes place in the last week of October and has become an annual event. Libraries and librarians are some of the leading promoters of Open Access Week, and they have been critical leaders in the movement. In addition to informing researchers about open access and its benefits, librarians are helping authors understand and use [Creative Commons](#) licenses as an alternative to conventional copyright agreements, ensuring that authors may freely share their work while maintaining proper attribution.

They have also been working to develop [alternative metrics](#) to assess the scholarly impact of open access publications and to enhance the visibility and search-ability of online content. Conventional metrics such as the [journal impact factor](#) are controlled by commercial publishers, such as Thompson-Reuters, which determine which journals are included in these indices. Inclusion criteria are often opaque and tend to work against newer journals, which include most open access publications. As a result, relatively few open access journals appear in the main indices used by universities to assess researchers' scholarship. This discourages many authors--especially junior authors without tenure--from publishing in these sources.

Not surprisingly, the [industry is becoming nervous](#) about the open access movement. In addition, professional associations, which have increasingly relied upon revenues from journals to support their operations, are being affected. Publishers such as SAGE and Palgrave MacMillan are now [offering their own open access journals](#) and seeking other ways to monetize open access content. Many commercial publishers now offer an option for traditional subscription-based journals to charge authors a fee to unlock individual articles for Open Access (a hybrid model of "[Gold Open Access](#)").

There have also been efforts to discredit the open access movement by reinforcing a common assumption that open access sources are less reliable than their printed counterparts. For instance, in a recent article in *Science* magazine, "[Who's Afraid of Peer Review ?](#)", John Bohannon reported on a study in which he submitted a bogus manuscript to over 300 open-access journals. He reported that nearly half of the journals accepted the paper. However, the absence of a control group in the study led more critical readers to suggest that the problem is not necessarily unique to open access publications. Nevertheless, Bohannon's article helped fuel the misleading impression that all open access sources contain less rigorous content than conventional sources. In reality, it is the editorial policy and practices of a journal, rather than the form of publication, that determines the quality and credibility of content.

The open access movement and related debates surrounding access to information and accessibility of scholarly research and software tools are critical to social movements and to the work for social justice more broadly. The [International Network of Scholar Activists](#) (INoSA) grew out of the conversations at the 2005 World Social Forum mentioned above. A key part of our group's work is to facilitate scholars' work to defend and advance the knowledge commons by sharing relevant [information and resources](#). Members are encouraged to use creative commons licensing when they publish and to join others in a [pledge to be open](#) by agreeing to review for and publish in mainly if not solely open access journals. INoSA is also working to connect scholar-activists with movements through collaboration with groups involved in the World Social Forum process. This work has brought us into a close working relationship with [May First/People Link](#), a technology activist group advocating for internet freedom, free and open source software, and accessibility of communications technology for those most harmed by capitalism.

When scholars publish in conventional ways, we participate in the enclosure of the knowledge commons and contribute to growing inequality and social exclusion—whether we intend to or not. While this is not news to most in the global South, more people in the global North need to be attentive to the vital issues

that are at stake.

Many scholars will be attracted to the ideas and values behind open access, and by working together we can put intense pressure on the companies that are benefitting from our work as researchers, reviewers, and editors. But along with a shift to open publishing, we should be anticipating and working for a much broader transformation of our professional institutions and work.

As noted above, professional associations often rely on revenues from commercial publishing. Are we ready to pay higher membership dues, scale back our professional conferences, and contribute personal resources and energies to support open access publishing? Are we ready to actively confront the practices that reproduce privilege, hierarchy, and exclusion in our work—including the interrogation of what constitutes legitimate knowledge?

In conclusion, the open access movement is helping define new ways of sharing information that lie outside the contemporary capitalist logic. We should understand it as part of the larger task our movements are engaging in to build alternatives to the prevailing world-system that will help lead us to a more sustainable, equitable, and just society. While the big picture is difficult to imagine, we can begin by thinking about how our own work as academics would change if we were part of a society organized around principles of sharing, equality, cooperation, and community well-being as opposed to the current one designed to maximize wealth accumulation through individualism and competition.

In essence the open access movement promotes the idea that all knowledge should be shared freely, including both scholarly research and the data on which it is based. This allows the advancement of scientific and creative discovery, and it improves our collective ability to improve public health and respond to various social problems.

Moreover, it recognizes that we are all dependent on the ability of people around the world to have access to the knowledge produced in the privileged spaces of the world, and to contribute to the work of shaping that knowledge.

For instance, epidemiologists in the global South need to have the latest medical journals in order to improve their ability to respond quickly and effectively against infectious diseases in their countries, and advancing research requires evidence based on experiences outside the rich countries. Public health practitioners in wealthy countries will also benefit from learning about innovative practices developed by their Southern counterparts forced to do their work with far fewer resources. With open access we put the “knowledge commons” off-limits to capitalist exploitation, allowing it to advance work for human emancipation and social transformation.